

Chapter 1

Ava's POV

I stepped out of the car and stared up at the Patel family mansion. The place looked as grand as ever, towering over the other luxury homes in one of the richest neighborhoods in the city of Pinecrest.

Tall marble pillars framed the entrance, and the huge glass windows gleamed in the late afternoon sun. The whole place smelled and looked beautiful, but there was no warmth to it—only a reminder that despite its beauty, this place had never felt like home.

The last time I saw this house, I was barely eight years old and being sent away, exiled to a boarding school with nothing more than a silly explanation and a hurried goodbye. Now, after so long, I was back—though I wasn't ready to face them just yet.

As I made my way to the gate, the guards looked at me with blank expressions, clearly not recognizing who I was. One of them stepped forward, already raising a hand to stop me.

"Excuse me, Miss, you can't just—"

Before he could nish, Uncle Bertram emerged from the house, his voice harsh and commanding.. "How dare you disrupt the young mistress of the Patel home?"

The guard's eyes widened, and I felt heat rush to my cheeks as all eyes turned to me. I never liked it when Uncle Bertram drew so much attention, but he always seemed to feel it was his duty to remind everyone of my place. A place I wasn't even sure belonged to me.

I hurried to hug him as soon as I was past the gate. "Uncle Bertram," I said, wrapping my arms around his wide frame, "it's so good to see you."

He patted my back, his touch gentle despite the strength in his voice. "You're back, my dear. You've grown so much. How have you been?"

My lips pulled into a faint smile. "I'm ne."

"Are you sure?" His brow furrowed as he studied my face. "You don't look ne." There was concern in his eyes, the kind that made me want to cry. But I couldn't. I had learned long ago that showing weakness in this house was an invitation for more hurt.

I took a deep breath, pushing the emotions down. "Dad always wanted me to be strong. I've been trying my best."

He smiled, but there was sadness there. He clearly understood that I was still affected by all that had happened.. "Ava, you've done well. It's not easy to manage trauma by yourself. But you have. And I'm proud of you for that."

We walked into the house, and there she was—Mother, seated on her favorite couch in the living room, ipping through a magazine with one leg crossed on the other. It was not surprising how little she had changed, still as cold and detached as I remembered.

I cleared my throat and tried to smile. "Hello, Mother."

She barely glanced up, her tone at and dismissive. "Oh, you're back. Good. There's a lot of work to do. Your sister is getting married."

I blinked. "Natalia... getting married?"

Mother nally looked up, but there was no trace of joy or warmth on her face. Just the same indifference she always wore like a mask. "Is there a problem?" she asked, as though I'd offended her simply by being surprised.

"No, I just—" I stammered, "I didn't know... I didn't think—"

"Spare me the rambling," she snapped. "You're here now. Help with the wedding preparations. The maids could use an extra hand. The engagement party is tomorrow."

I forced a smile, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "Who is she getting married to?"

"A poor piece of trash called Liam Ross," she said, a hint of disgust curling around the name. "He comes from an unfortunate background. But what does it matter? The arrangements are set."

Liam Ross. The name did sound familiar, though I couldn't quite place where I'd heard it before. And did she just say poor? That didn't sound right. Natalia would never settle for someone without wealth. There had to be more to the story.

"I'll go nd Natalia," I said, eager to escape Mother's icy gaze. I wasn't planning on asking about this "poor" Liam. It didn't seem like the kind of topic I wanted to discuss with her.

I found Natalia in her room, surrounded by a ton of dresses, each one more radiant than the last. She was barking orders at the maids, who scrambled to pack the dresses with care. Her back was to me, but I didn't care. I rushed over to hug her, the excitement at seeing my sister again after all these years bubbling up inside me.

"Natalia!" I exclaimed, a wide smile stretching across my face.

She stepped away immediately, her expression twisted with disgust. "Ugh, don't touch me!" Her eyes raked over me as though I were some stray dog that had wandered in from the street. "You're lthy. Who knows what kind of germs you picked up from that wretched boarding school?"

Her words hit me like a slap, the sting sharper than I'd expected. I hadn't seen her in eight years, and this was the reception I got? My chest tightened, but I forced myself to keep smiling. "Natalia, it's been eight years. Didn't you miss me at all?"

She scoffed. "Miss you? I wish Mother had just sent you away for good. Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end."

The ache in my heart grew deeper, and I bit down on my lip to keep myself from crying. Be strong Ava. "I heard you're getting married," I said, changing the subject. "Congratulations."

"Of course," she replied with a smug smile. "I'm in love, Ava. Liam and I decided to tie the knot. We'll be engaged tomorrow and married in two weeks."

"That's... great to hear. I'm happy for you," I said, though part of me still couldn't believe Natalia would marry someone without money. She'd always been the type who craved status and luxury above all else.

Natalia's smile widened, as though she knew exactly what I was thinking. "Thank you. Not like you would know what it means to fall in love."

I decided not to take the bait, changing the subject again. "Where's Dad?"

Her expression hardened. "He's right where you left him. The way you left him—crippled." She turned back to her dresses, her tone dismissive.

I felt the breath leave my lungs. "How can you say that? Natalia, he's our father."

She glanced at me and rolled her eyes. "You should go see him. But don't take too long. Mother said you need to help the maids get everything ready. You're lucky I'm even letting you attend the engagement party." She ended with a smirk, as though she had just won a battle I didn't even know we were ghing.

I turned to leave, but just as I reached the door, I heard her whisper behind me, "You've come back at the perfect time, Ava. You're going to serve a very special purpose for this family. I hope you're ready."

A chill ran down my spine at her words. I didn't know what she meant, but the way she said it... it didn't feel right. Still, I shook off the feeling and went to nd Dad.

Seeing him again after all these years was harder than I thought it would be. He looked smaller, frailer than I remembered, his eyes empty and distant. I hugged him and felt my heart break even more as I saw the state he was in.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "This is all my fault."

After a long, tearful conversation with Dad, I reluctantly left to join the maids.

Mrs. Rose, Uncle Bertram's wife, wasted no time in giving me a long list of tasks. She kept me busy all day, making sure I didn't have a single moment to rest. By the time I collapsed into my tiny bed in the servant's quarters, my body was aching and I was willing to let it rest.

Just as I was about to drift off, I heard hushed voices outside my door. "Do you think she knows?" one of the maids whispered.

"Of course not," another voice replied. "But she'll nd out soon enough."

The footsteps faded down the hall, leaving me wide awake, my mind racing with thoughts. Who are they talking about? Me?

I should have just stayed at that school.